

Title: Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) model for development: Open Educational Resources.

Categorisation in Theme or Subtheme: Community Development: Open Education Resources: Models to choose Adopt and Adapt

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Abstract

The development of, access to and use of Open Educational Resources (OER) essentially means that skills and knowledge are being shared. It is largely through technology that this has been made possible and education is no longer local in terms of preparation and delivery but truly global. The development and promotion of OER supports a growing sense of community that overcomes cultural, physical and economic barriers. The use of OERs has been a process of giving, receiving and passing on skills and knowledge for development through education. The Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth presents this model of OER development. Members of VUSSC are small developing countries linked partly as former colonies of the British Empire. Despite differences in many aspects such as race, culture, location the common factor is Commonwealth membership which leads to another crucial factor – language. We are all able to speak English as part of the colonial heritage and as a result we at this point in time can communicate and collaborate using this common language. The materials and resources we produce are also in English and therefore we are able to share with each other and the rest of the English speaking world. As open educational resources (OERs) we are also able to translate the materials or content to other languages.

The VUSSC consortium aims to bridge the digital divide which exists for these small states by taking advantage of online communication to support and develop education so that it can in turn support the achievement of the Millennium Goals and Education for All Initiative.

How does VUSSC do this?

- (1) It starts with respective countries/institutions choosing their representatives who will become team leaders. A leadership training workshop is held prior to the course development exercise so that the management of the course writing and all its social, administrative and other logistics can be dealt with by the team leaders. Team leaders themselves also have their own forum before during and after a course writing workshop. This training takes place in Vancouver at the COL headquarters. Leadership skills and knowledge from this training is also expected to be shared with colleagues at home institutions as well as with the rest of the teams when they converge on location for the writing workshop.
- (2) The respective countries and institutions then choose relevant representatives to take part in the training workshop held in one of

the countries or an appropriate location which is easily accessed by air travel. These people converge and with the team leaders they collectively address the task at hand which is to acquire the knowledge and skills to develop content or learning materials on-line and through their own discussions and deliberations. The COL Instructional Design Template was used and “basecamp” an online service was introduced as a private space to collaborate and exchange ideas in. Upon completion the selected course will be available for the national institutions of the small states to offer, adapt or use in whatever way they see fit. As an OER it is a resource which is open for the taking and adaptation for use in education by others for free.

- (3) Alongside these course/content developments the VUSSC consortium was also mindful of the quality assurance as well as the recognition and credibility of these courses and subsequent qualifications within the small states and in the wider international arena. For this reason the Trans national qualifications framework (TQF) was developed by a sub committee of the main VUSSC management committee. This was to be used by member countries without national qualification authorities as well as countries with national qualification authorities.

To date VUSSC has developed eight courses which were chosen by the small states themselves through their education ministers. Such courses are crucial to small states sustainability and development for example, Disaster management, Agriculture, Ports Administration, Building and Construction, Fishing, Online Content Development.

Collaboration for course development itself is a dynamic process as seen in the various training workshops or “bootcamps” as they have been called. Within the 3 weeks people from different countries are able to achieve their objective as well as establish networks for further collaboration on-line. The computer illiterates quickly acquire skills to keep up and contribute and afterwards are able to operate and work differently: more efficiently and innovatively using access through computers having been part of the training.

Communication is facilitated largely by English as the lingua franca and indeed this makes all the difference since different countries have their own languages but their intertwined histories have landed them with English as a major language for their own development. The development of VUSSC as an international collaborative community is able to be sustained because of the common language that can be used.

As small developing countries the needs and aspirations are very similar and the common aim is to produce materials which are of high quality, relevant, user friendly, adaptable and portable. The portability largely comes with the digital format. Quality and relevance are reinforced by the cross section of people who work together. They are not only educators but “stakeholders”

with various combinations of experience, interest, knowledge and skills on offer for the development of the selected course. The 'user friendly' factor is well deciphered and integrated into the compilation of the course because there is a wide range of people who give the broad perspective of possible users of the course and as multiple authors with relevant expertise and qualifications, the course can only be better. Content is greatly enhanced and much time and money is saved by the collective effort.

It is also a fact that the gathering of people from diverse and different backgrounds with membership of the Commonwealth and the use of English as the language of communication augurs well for interracial , international peace and understanding – that which can also be unobtrusively integrated into the courses in an “all for one and one for all” spirit for the sake of development in education which is so crucial to national progress and advancement.

How does it happen and how can it be sustained?

Donor funding plays a large part and VUSSC together with Col needs to identify funding sources, fund raise and collaborate with other bodies to leverage funding. It may seem costly at this initial stage whereby seemingly so many people are funded to travel overseas and be hosted and accommodated. As a participant and beneficiary I can confidently say that the VUSSC model is one of “value for money.” The short term training has a definite out put which is completed by the end of the 3 weeks. The participants are wiser, more skilled, more knowledgeable and there is a deep seated appreciation and commitment towards VUSSC objectives as well as national goals. Moreover upon return to the respective countries, it is mandatory that the participant must train a further 5 people.

Because the “ownership” of VUSSC was clearly established at the outset by the Ministers and thereafter to the operations which were clearly subject to national interests, national choices of representatives and national selection of courses; VUSSC is very much a household word in the relative institutions from the various countries because ordinary working people were actively engaged.

Professional links and “think tanks” facilitated by the face to face meetings at bootcamps will go a long way in keeping the spirit of VUSSC alive and enabling other mechanisms to sustain its work. As an empowerment process not just in the development of OERs but in building up networks and connections which are anchored in the Commonwealth of Learning institution itself. It can only strengthen positive international and multicultural relations facilitated by initial face to face meetings and continued via technology. It is possible to interact, collaborate, create and share more materials through on-line access.

Reservations and hesitations.

Connectivity itself and the cost of connectivity proves to be a major concern for the development and establishment of on-line learning. The cost of hardware is another as well as the associated training and development of personnel to service computers, printers and other multi media equipment etc. The willingness of institutions to take the OERs in digital form especially and use them is yet to be tested as many are still entrenched in face to face delivery mode and hard copy textbook course development. Connectivity affects enthusiasm as most people would “give up” easily if time taken to access or down load material is too long.

The stance of institutions with regard to prioritising also to invest in computers and computer labs for both staff and students so as to access on- line materials and essentially use the technology to enhance teaching and learning.

Because OERs are open for adaptation and change for different circumstances, monitoring their quality can prove to be difficult and may affect their constant recycle, re-useability.

There is also the consideration of copyright which has been addressed to a certain extent with compliance in licensing of proprietary software. The transfer of learning materials is encouraged through the use of Creative Commons copyright licenses, instructional design templates, an online Internet collaboration space (basecamp) and a wiki.

The actual use of the technology to enhance education by exploiting the power of the internet, the Web 2 technologies and essentially to go beyond email which many are now familiar with and join the vibrant and very useful online world of education.

Possibilities and realising potential: way forward

To commit fully, the national institutions need to build a stable infrastructure in which to develop and use the capacity for online learning. Although online learning is closely aligned with open and distance learning, it can also be used to enhance on campus learning itself.

A stable infrastructure therefore needs a national commitment by way of national budgetary allocations as well as the development of policies and legislation. It points clearly at a partnership also between learning institutions and governments – at least within the developing countries of VUSSC where institutions are often highly dependent on government funding. Open schools and the school nets are part and parcel of ICTs in education development so that here OERs also play a major role in the transferability and sharability of good learning materials not just for tertiary levels but for elementary up to secondary of high schools.

Open Educational resources is the means by which education at all levels can be more accessible, more affordable and more efficient. With the commitment and strategizing such as that which has been seen with the VUSSC initiative; it is possible to reduce cost, improve quality and widen access to educational opportunities using OER.

It subscribes to a global perspective of sharing which sits well with small states whose own societies and traditional social structures still retain the value of sharing. To this end we can also become part of a growing

movement in today's world whereby knowledge is regarded as the common wealth of mankind. The sharing of open education resources and other learning materials contribute to and allow us to be part of this.

The VUSSC model for the development of OER therefore is a viable one which is practical, pragmatic and far reaching. With the onset of the digital divide in the new age of information technology it has appeased, inspired, provided motivation, hope and confidence in small developing states who are members of VUSSC.

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